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Reagan will not rule out Soviet plot in defection

By Bill Gertz
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President Reagan yesterday declined to rule out the possibility that the "defection" of Vitaly Yurchenko, a high-ranking officer of the KGB, the Soviet secret police, was a ploy by Moscow.

The spy story took still another bizarre twist yesterday with reports that the wife of a Soviet trade representative who plunged 27 stories from an apartment balcony to her death in a street in Toronto on Tuesday may have been Mr. Yurchenko's mysterious mistress.

Canadian authorities, noting the "sensitive" nature of the episode, refused to provide specific details of the death of the woman tentatively identified as Svetlana Dedkova, but said there was no link between Mrs. Dedkova and Mr. Yurchenko.

Police sources in Toronto said Mrs. Dedkova apparently jumped, and she was said to have left a note.

President Reagan, while making no comment about the death in Toronto, said three recent incidents — involving a Soviet merchant seaman in New Orleans, a Soviet soldier in Kabul, Afghanistan, and Mr. Yurchenko — may have been related.

"You can't rule out the possibility that this might have been a deliberate ploy or maneuver," the president said in an interview with wire service reporters.

Mr. Yurchenko left for Moscow yesterday in the trappings of celebrity — flowers at Dulles International Airport, waves to television cameramen and a seat on a special Aeroflot flight to Moscow.

A theory that attracted both believers and scoffers here yesterday was that Mr. Yurchenko decided to go home again after a mistress in Toronto, said to be the wife of a Soviet diplomat, told him that their love affair was over. Mr. Yurchenko is said to have gone to see her in Canada in October.

"There's no way to establish" whether Mr. Yurchenko had defected and then changed his mind, President Reagan said yesterday, or had planned the fake defection in Rome from the beginning.

"I think it's awfully easy for any American to be perplexed by anyone who could live in the United States and would prefer to live in Russia," the president said.

Asked about the value of the information Mr. Yurchenko supplied to CIA debriefers over a three-month period, Mr. Reagan said: "Well, actually, the information that he provided was not anything new or sensational. It was pretty much information already known to the CIA."

Mr. Yurchenko gave information to U.S. investigators about several former CIA operatives suspected of spying for the Soviets, including fugitive former CIA case officer Edward L. Howard, who is believed to have fled the country to avoid arrest.

Sen. William S. Cohen, Maine Republican, said in an interview he and several other members of the Senate Intelligence Committee had doubted Mr. Yurchenko's credibility from the time the committee first heard of the case in late September.

"We're laymen, we're not experts, and we deferred to the judgment of the pros, but we indicated we were somewhat skeptical," said Mr. Cohen.

Mr. Cohen suggested that Mr. Yurchenko may have tried to obtain information from the CIA through the debriefing process. He said Mr. Yurchenko could find out how much the CIA knew about certain intelligence matters from the follow-up questions the CIA asked after his answers to initial questions.

"In other words, we were in fact confirming what had only been suspicions on their part," Mr. Cohen said.

He said the CIA would be reviewing the debriefing transcripts to determine what information Mr. Yurchenko could supply to the KGB when he reached Moscow.

Mr. Cohen said that from the first CIA briefings to the committee on the Yurchenko case, he had felt "something wasn't quite right about this." He said the timing of Mr. Yurchenko's move coincided with several defections in West Germany and questions about sharing technology associated with the president's proposed space-based missile defense system with the NATO alliance that raised "warning signals" among some committee members.

"It seemed to me and others that we accepted his *bona fides* too quickly," Mr. Cohen said. "It just seemed that there was a very eager assumption on our part that he was in fact genuine" and more time should have been devoted to determining his authenticity.

Mr. Cohen speculated that the KGB elevated Mr. Yurchenko "to spot No. 5" in the KGB hierarchy to establish his credentials, but that Mr. Yurchenko held a much lower post and was "expendable" for a fake defection operation.

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